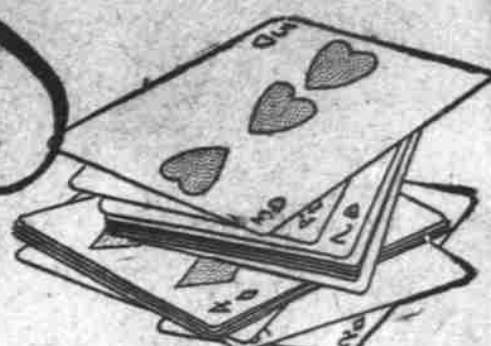


# The TREY O' HEARTS

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE



## 12TH INSTALLMENT

The photo-drama corresponding to the installments of "The Trey O' Hearts" may now be seen at the leading moving picture theaters. By this unique arrangement with the Universal Film Mfg. Co. it is therefore not only possible to read "The Trey O' Hearts" in this paper, but also to see each installment of it at the moving picture theaters.

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### MIRAGE

**SYNOPSIS**—The 3 of Hearts is the "death-sign" employed by Seneca Trine in the private war of vengeance which, through the agency of his daughter Judith, he wages against Alan Law, son of the man, now dead, who was innocently responsible for the accident which rendered Trine a helpless cripple. Alan loves and is loved by Rose, Judith's twin and double. Judith vows to compass his death, but under dramatic circumstances Alan saves her life and so, unwittingly, wins her love. Thereafter Judith is by turns actuated by the new love, the old hatred, and jealousy of her sister. In escaping her persecution, Alan and Rose and their friend Barcus take refuge in the Painted Hills—a range of arid mountains bordering the Arizona desert. Judith, while pursuing, suffers a change of heart and warns them in time to avert an attempt upon their lives. In return for this she is seized by an outlaw accomplice and bound helplessly to the back of a horse. Alan shoots the accomplice and the horse runs away, following a perilous mountain trail.

### I—THE MAN IN THE SHADOW.

Two hundred feet, if one, Hopi Jim fell from the lip of the cliff. Then suddenly the Thing that had been Hopi Jim Slade was checked in its headlong descent by the outstanding trunk of a tree, over which it remained, doubled up, limp, horrible.

The miniature land-slide that had been caused by his fall went on, settling gradually as the slope became less sheer. Only part of it, a double handful of pebbles, gained the bottom of the canyon. Its muffled impact on the ground round his feet roused the man who had compassed the bandit's death from the pose he had unconsciously assumed on the instant of firing.

He stepped back and snatched up a case containing binoculars.

Not before the glasses were adjusted to his vision did he find time to respond absently to the alarmed and insistent inquiries of his two companions, a man of his own age and a girl of some years less, who had been awakened from their sleep by the report of the rifle.

Now the latter plucked his sleeve, momentarily deflecting the glasses from the object which they were following so sedulously as it moved along the heights: a wildly running horse with a woman bound helpless upon its back, both sharply in silhouette against the burning blue.

"Alan!" the girl demanded, "what is it? Why did you fire? Why won't you answer me? What is it?"

"Judith," Alan replied tersely, again picking up with the glasses the runaway horse that fled so madly along the perilous and narrow track of the hill trail.

The name was echoed from two throats as Alan swung sharply and thrust the glasses into the hands of the girl.

"Judith," he affirmed with a look of poignant solicitude. "She's roped to the back of that crazy broncho—helpless! See for yourself: one false step—suppose a stone turns beneath its hoof—she'll be killed!"

While the girl focused her glasses upon that speck that flew against the sky Alan turned to the two horses hobbled near by and seizing a saddle threw it over the back of one.

At this the other man strode to his side and dropping a detaining hand upon his arm, asked:

"What are you going to do?"

Alan shook the hand off and went on with his self-appointed task.

"Go after her, Tom, of course," he replied. "What else? That animal is crazy, I tell you."

"Even so," Tom Barcus argued, "you can't climb that hillside on horseback—and if you could, you'd be too late to catch up, much less prevent an accident."

"I know it. But suppose it doesn't fall . . . You know what's beyond these hills—desert! And the girl is helpless, I tell you, bound hand and foot. Think of her being carried that way—all day, perhaps—face up to this brutal sun!"

"You're raving," Barcus commented in a hopeless turn. He looked to the girl. "Rose—Miss Trine—reason with this madman—"

Dropping the glasses, the girl came swiftly and confidently to her lover's side, lifting her lips to his.

"Go, sweetheart!" she told him. "Save her if you can!"

Then hoofbeats drumming on the hard-packed earth of the canyon trail struck a hundred echoes from its rugged, rocky walls.

Mr. Barcus showed Rose Trine a face almost ludicrous with its anguished smile, that was intended to seem reassuring.

"Let's look sharp and follow him as quick as may be," he urged. "Lightning will never strike us so long as we stick to Mr. Law of the charmed life—but I don't mind telling you, once out of his company, I'm just naturally afraid of the dark!"

### II—THE TRAIL OF FLYING HOOF-PRINTS.

In the still air of that young day the chill of night lingered stubbornly—and would until the shadow of the eastern rampart had crept slowly down the canyon's western wall, telescoped upon itself and vanished, letting in the sun to make the place a pit of torment and of burning.

Refreshed from rest and exhilarated by this grateful coolness, his horse responded willingly to the first light touch of Alan's spur. In a twinkling the overnight camp dropped from view behind the rounded shoulder of a hillside, mesquite-cloaked.

Then from its first spirited flight the horse settled down to steady going, lengthened its stride, and ran for leagues with the long, apparently effortless and tireless lope of the plains-bred broncho, ventre-a-terra.

Alan's departure from camp had anticipated by a round quarter-hour the appearance on the upper trail of friends of the slain bandit, to the number of four or five, who had both discovered and recovered his body, called his death murder and pledged themselves to its avenger—laying responsibility for the putative crime at the door of the man and woman to be seen in the canyon, immediately below the scene of Hopi Jim's fall.

Between the moment when discovery of the men on the ridge trail interrupted their simple and hurried breakfast and that which found Rose and Barcus mounted on the back of their own horse and making the best of their way down the canyon in pursuit of Alan, but little time had lapsed.

And even with his double burden, their horse

made better time upon the broad lower level than those who followed the ridge trail. By mid-morning, when they approached the foothills that ran down to the desert, the pursuit was more than a mile in the rear and shut off to 5000 by a monolithic hill, while Alan was many a weary mile in advance.

He sat upon his horse, just then, at standstill upon the summit of a rounded knoll, the Painted hills lifting up behind him, the desert before unfolding like a map.

Descending the knoll he reined his lagging mount back into the trail, following its winding course through the foothills and round the base of that monolithic mountain toward the junction with the ridge trail, miles away.

It approached the hour of noon before he gained the point where the two trails joined and struck out across the desert. And here he discovered what he thought indisputable indications that the fright of Judith's horse had persisted.

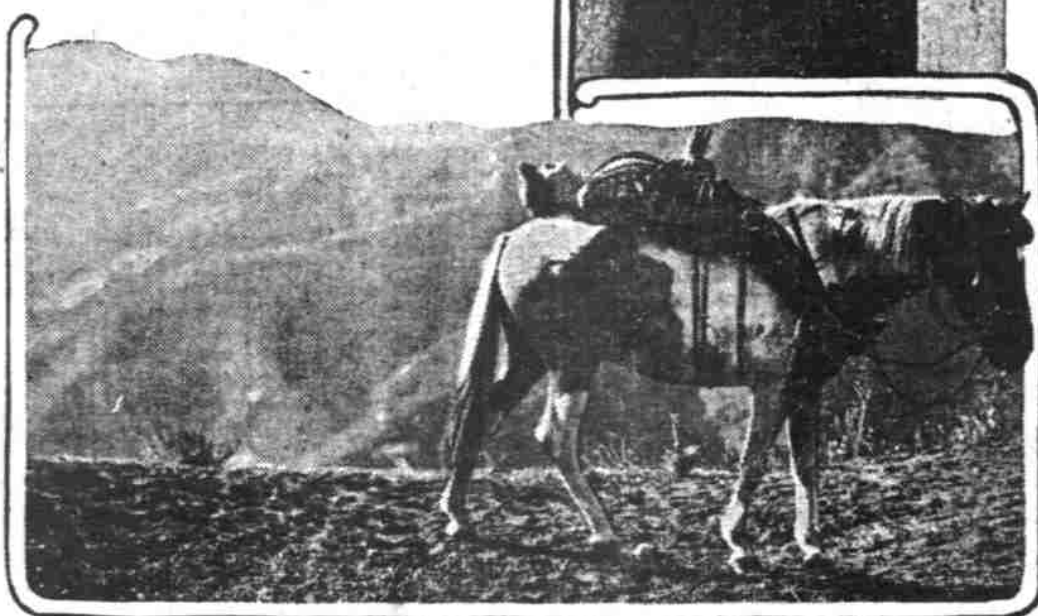
Abandoning immediately all notion of returning through the hills by the ridge-trail, he turned and swung away at the best pace he could spur from his broncho, delivering himself into the pitiless embrace of that implacable wilderness of sun and sand.

At long intervals he would check the broncho and, reeling in the saddle, endeavor to sweep the desert with his binoculars.

And toward the middle of the afternoon he fancied that something rewarded one such effort: something for an instant swam athwart the field of the glasses: something that seemed to move like a weary horse with a human figure bound to its back.

But now phenomena were discernible which, had he been more desert wise, would have made him pause and think before he ventured farther from those hills, already beyond reach as they were.

His first appreciated warning came when the surface of the desert seemed to lift and shake like the top of a canvas tent in a gale. At the same



time a mighty gust of wind swept athwart the waste, hot as a furnace-blast. In a trice dust enveloped man and horse, a stifling cloud of superheated particles that stung the flesh like a myriad needles. And then darkness fell, the twilight of hades, a copper-colored pall. Nothing remained visible beyond arm's length.

Blinded, half suffocated, unpeppably dismayed and bewildered, the broncho swung round, back to the blast, and refused to budge another inch.

Himself more than half-dazed, but still hounded by his nightmare vision of Judith, Alan dismounted to escape being torn bodily from the saddle by that hellish sand-blast, and seizing the bridle, sought to draw the horse on with him.

He wasted his strength in that endeavor: the animal balked, planted its hoofs deep in the sand, stiffened its legs and resisted with the stubbornness of a rock; then, of a sudden, jerked its head smartly, snapped the bridle from his grasp and flung away, scudding before the storm.

Pursuit was out of the question: indeed, the bridle was barely torn from his hand before Alan lost sight of the broncho.

For a moment he stood rooted in consternation as in a bog—with an arm upthrust across his face.

Then the thought of Judith occurred. Head bended and shoulders rounded, he began to forge a way into the teeth of the sandstorm.

How long he fought on, pitting his strength against the elements, cannot be reckoned.

In the end he stumbled blindly down a slight decline and was abruptly conscious that he had in some way found shelter from the full force of the wind.

He staggered on another yard or two, breathing more freely, and blundered into a rough-ribbed wall of rock—some sporadic outcrop, he understood, whose bulk stood between him and the storm.

He thought to rest for a time, until the storm had spent its greatest strength; but as he laid his shoulder gratefully against the rock and scrubbed the dust from his smarting eyes he saw what he at first conceived to be an hallucination: Judith Trine standing within a yard of him, alive, strong, free.

He stared incredulously, saw her recognize him, open her mouth to utter a wondering cry that was inaudible, and come quickly nearer.

"Alan! You came to me! You followed me, through all this!"

He threw off her hand with a bitter laugh—that was like the croaking of a raven as it issued from his bone-dry throat—and in a momentary possession of hysterical madness, reeled away from the woman and the shelter of the rock and delivered himself anew to the mercy of the dust-storm.

### III—OPEN MUTINY.

Though she had been schooled to hold the very name of Law in loathing unpeppable and to think of Alan as a mortal enemy and as one whose death alone could properly requite the cruel injury that had been done her father; and though the man himself had laughed to scorn her first involuntary confession of that love for him which now consumed her being with its insatiable fires, she swallowed her chagrin and followed him with the solicitude of one whose love can recognize no wrong in its object. Through all the remainder of that day of terror she was never far from his side.

With the meekness of the strong, she made her

self his shadow. And she was now the stronger, for she had had more than an hour's rest beside the waterhole, which he had missed on the way of that rocky windbreak. Sooner or later his strength must fall him and he would need her: till then she was content to bide her hour.

It befell presently in startling fashion: she was not a yard behind him when he vanished abruptly.

But the next moment Judith herself was trembling on the crumbling brink of an arroyo of depth and width indeterminable in the obscurity of the dust-storm. Down this, evidently, Alan had fallen in his blindness.

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tell sorely upon her. She reeled slightly as she walked, weaving a winding trail across and across the straight line of footprints that marked Alan's course through the ordered pattern of the powdered sagebrush.

And of a sudden she collapsed.

Instinct alone made Alan glance over-shoulder: for she had made no sound whatever.

He turned and came directly back to her, knelt beside her, lifted her head, pillowed it gently on his arm and piled her in turn with the dregs of the canteen.

With a sigh, a stifled moan and a little shiver,

she revived.

He helped her gently to regain her feet, passed an arm round her.

Thus they struggled on in strange, dumb companionship of misery and wonder.

Thus an hour passed; and for all their desperate struggles neither could see that the light on the mountainside was a yard the nearer.

Behind them other lights appeared, two staring yellow eyes that peered up over the horizon, seemed to pause a time in search of the two, then leaped out directly toward them.

Of this they were altogether ignorant; and when a deep, droning sound disturbed the desert silence, like the purring of some gigantic cat, both ascribed it to the drumming of their laboring pulses.

The two lights were not a mile behind them when, silently, without a sign to warn the girl, Alan released her, took a step apart and dropped as if shot.

Instantly she was kneeling by his side. But in the act of bending over him she drew back and remained for several moments motionless, staring at those twin glaring eyes, sweeping down upon them with all the speed attainable by a six-cylinder touring car negotiating a trackless desert.

When Judith did move it was not to comfort Alan. On the contrary, her first act was to draw from her pocket a heavy, blunt-nosed revolver, break it at the breech and blow its barrel clear of dust.

Her hand went next to the holster on Alan's hip. From this she extracted his Colt's .45, treating it as she had the other. Then she crouched low above the man she loved, as if thinking perhaps to escape notice from the occupants of the motorcar.

If that were her thought, it was bred of an idle hope. Alan had chosen to fall in the middle of a wide space so arid that not even sagebrush had ventured to take root there. When the glare of the headlights fell upon them it was inevitable that discovery should follow. The motor car stopped within twenty feet. Three men jumped out and ran toward the pair, leaving two in the car—the chauffeur and one who occupied a corner of the rear seat: an aged man with the face of a damned soul, doomed for a little time to live upon this earth in the certain knowledge of his damnation.

As this happened, Judith Trine leaped to her feet and stood over the body of Alan, a revolver poised in either hand.

"Halt!" she ordered imperatively. "Hands up!" The three who had alighted obeyed without a moment's hesitation: her father's creatures, they knew the daughter's temper far too well to dream of opposing her will.

In the six hands that were silhouetted against the headlights' radiance, three revolvers glimmered; but at her command all three dropped harmlessly to the earth.

Then, sharply, "Stand back two paces!" she required.

They moved unanimously.

Darting forward, she picked up and pocketed the three weapons, then with one of her own singled out the men she named.

"Now, Marrophat—and you, Hicks—pick Mr. Law up and carry him into the car. And treat him gently, mind! If one of you lifts a finger to harm him, that one shall answer to me."

Still none ventured to dispute her. The two men designated, without a sign of disinclination, stepped forward. One lifted Alan Law by the shoulders; the other took his legs. Between them they bore him with every care toward the motor car.

But now a second will manifested itself. The man in the rear seat lifted up a weirdly sonorous voice:

"Stop!" he cried. "Stop this nonsense! Drop that man! Judith, I command you—"

"Be silent!" the girl cut in sharply. "I command here—if it's necessary to tell you."

There was a pause of astonishment. Then the old man broke out in exasperation that threatened to wax into fury: "Judith! What do you mean by this? Has it indeed come to this that my own daughter defies me to my face?"

"Apparently!" she shot back, with a short laugh. "Judge for yourself!"

"Have you forgotten your vow to me?"

"No. But I take it back and cancel it: that is my privilege, I believe. . . . Silence!" she stormed as he strove to gainsay her. "Silence—do you hear?—or it will be the worse for you!"

As well command the sea to still its voice: her father raged like the madman that he was, for the time being divested of his habitual mask of frigid heartlessness.

And seeing that there was no other way of quieting him, the girl turned to the third man.

"Now, Jimmy!" she said crisply. "Into that car—and be quick about it—and gag him!"

"If you do," her father foamed, "I'll have your life!"

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A flourish of her weapons gained instant obedience.

She stepped up on the running board and shot a quick, searching glance at the face of the chauffeur.

"Straight ahead, my man!" she said. "Make for the nearest pass through those hills yonder, and don't delay unless you're anxious for trouble. Off you go!"

The car began to move. She swept the three men in the desert a mocking bow, jumped into the body of the car and slammed the door.

They made no effort to plead their cause and secure passage even as far as the edge of the desert; doubtless they knew too well the futility of that, she thought, as she settled back in a seat, chuckling with the memory of those three masks of dismay unmitigated.

It was not until five minutes later, when she straightened up from making Alan comfortable that she realized what had made them so content to abide by her will.

Then she heard their voices lifted together in a long, shrill howl that was quickly answered by fainter yells from a distant quarter of the desert, then by pistols popping and flashing some two miles away, then by a growing rumor of galloping hoofs.

The night glasses in the car afforded her flashes of a body of several horsemen—some six or seven, she judged—making at top speed toward the spot where Marrophat, Hicks and Jimmy waited beside a beacon which they had built and lighted.

Half a dozen sentences exchanged with the chauffeur advised her that these were horsemen from the town of Mesa who had charged themselves with the duty of avenging the death of Hopi Jim Slade.

A sardonic chuckle from within Trine's gag goaded the girl into a sudden fury.

Exacting his utmost speed from the chauffeur, under penalty of her displeasure, she set herself to revive Alan.

With the aid of such stores of food and drink as the car carried, this was quickly enough accomplished.

Strangling with an overdose of brandy too little diluted with water, Alan sat up, grasped the conditions in a flash, and gained further information as he devoured sandwiches and emptied a canteen.

The mountain pass was now, he judged, a mile distant. The light on the hillside, according to the chauffeur, was that of a prospector who had camped there temporarily. There was nothing, then, to be feared from that quarter, but solely from the rear—where the horsemen, having picked up Marrophat and his companions, had instituted hot pursuit, and were now strung out in a long, straggling line, three horses carrying double the farthestmost—perhaps a mile and a half away—one with a single rider the nearest, well within three-quarters of a mile.

Nobly mounted, this last came on like the wind, gaining on the motor car with every stride: for his horse was trained to such going, whereas the car at best could only labor heavily in dust and sand.

None the less, it had won to a point within a quarter of a mile from the pass before the horseman got within what he esteemed the proper range, and opened fire.

He fired thrice. His first shot winged wide, his second by ill-chance ripped through a rear tire of the car, thus placing upon it an additional handicap, while this third sought the zenith as his hands flew up and he dropped from the saddle, drilled through the body by Alan's only shot.

A long-range pistol duel was in progress before the car had covered half the remaining distance to the pass.

By the time it entered this last, which proved to be a narrow ravine with towering sides of crumbly earth and shale and broken rock, the pursuit was not a hundred yards behind, while the firing was well-nigh continuous.

Two hundred feet above the trail two men were working with desperate haste at some mysterious business—though none noticed them.

Only the chauffeur was aware of a woman running down the hillside at an angle, to intercept the car several hundred yards from the mouth of the pass.

As it drew near the spot where she paused, waving both arms frantically, the head of the pursuing party swept into the mouth of the ravine.

At the same time the chauffeur noticed that the two men on the hillside were following the woman pell-mell, throwing themselves down the slope with gigantic leaps and bounds.

And then a great explosion rent the peaceful hush of night—that till then had been profaned by the pattering cracks of the revolver fusillade.

As the roar of dynamite subsided the entire side of the hill shifted and slid ponderously down, choking the ravine with debris to the depth of some thirty or forty feet, burying the leaders of the pursuit beyond hope of rescue.

Only an instant later the motor car jolted to a halt and Alan pulled himself together to find that Rose and Barcus were standing beside the door and jabbering joyful greetings, mixed with more or less incoherent explanations of the manner in which they had come to seek shelter for the night in the prospector's shack and, roused by the noise of firing and recognising Alan in the car by the aid of night glasses, had with the prospector's aid hit upon this scheme of shooting a landslide in between the pursuit and its devoted quarry.

(To be continued.)